

Citizenship Education: Engaging Children in Building Community

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In 1988, as two of us (L.E.N. and J. M. F.) were teaching elementary grades at the Laboratory School at the University of Northern Iowa, a new journal—*Social Studies and the Young Learner*—was being planned. The editor asked us to write an article on the cover theme of “citizenship and ethics” for the first issue.¹ At the time, newspaper headlines were reporting a “monkey business” scandal engendered by presidential hopeful Gary Hart. Under the scrutiny of a disapproving public, he was categorically dismissed as a candidate for president. The same year, Joe Biden dropped from the presidential race over a charge of plagiarism related to a stump speech. Congress was investigating the Iran-Contra affair, first revealed in 1986, in which top Reagan administration officials had bargained for the release of seven U.S. hostages (held by Iran) in exchange for weapons (to be sold to Iran).

What better time to focus on good citizenship! While the post-60s era had become accustomed to a degree of public scrutiny to which neither President Eisenhower nor JFK were subjected, public displays of otherwise bad social choices only underscored the need to teach good citizenship in the nation’s schools. As first- and third-grade teachers, we sought to link good citizenship to solid classroom practices. These practices were articulated as the *Democratic Classroom Interaction Model*, which grew directly from the authors’ classroom experiences. The purpose of this model was to identify and illustrate how teachers could organize their classrooms to teach the citizenship dispositions on which a solid democratic society is founded. This model also provides an analytical lens through which teachers can examine the degree to which the five Citizenship Processes are present in their teaching. (See **Table 1**, page 21.)

Over the decades, the underlying principles of democracy remain constant. In order for today’s students to grow and thrive as members of a democratic society, they must become fluent in speaking “democracy” with a vocabulary character-

ized by *communication, participation, interaction, application, and reflection*.

Keeping these democratic ideals in mind, today’s students are exposed to more violence in the family, community and the media than their counterparts were in 1988.² As family structures change, students are also more linguistically, racially, ethnically and economically diverse.³ In addition to the widening diversity of today’s students, teachers juggle unprecedented organizational demands as the standards movement and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) press for ever-higher levels of academic accountability.⁴ Simultaneously, children walk across the school’s threshold bringing with them a growing list of needs ranging from breakfast to basketball shoes. The threats and violence of the post-9/11 world, coupled with a ubiquitous technological connectivity, have inspired many schools to become intentional in their efforts to reinforce positive character traits and to build solid classroom communities that emulate democratic ideals.⁵

Given these conditions the Democratic Classroom Interaction Model is as relevant today as it was in 1988. Four key characteristics make this enduring model appropriate for today’s students. The model:

- Establishes high academic, social, and ethical expectations for children.⁶
- Allows children to participate in their own decision-making at a young age (an imperative in a technology-based world).⁷
- Provides for multiple teacher and student roles in interactive learning.⁸
- Focuses on the classroom as well as the parent and community connections with the school.⁹

In the following paragraphs, we will describe how second grade teachers implemented the Democratic Classroom Interaction Model to inspire students to grow as citizens and

Table 1. **Democratic Classroom Interaction Model**

Citizenship Processes	Teacher	Students	Instructional Setting
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes rules for interaction with group Initiates problem Encourages shared interaction and decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State and refine the problem Develop ownership for the problem Brainstorm possible ways of solving the problem 	
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chooses topics for study Gathers resources material Leads discussion Monitors student participation Listens to students' ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree upon a plan of action Select appropriate resources Choose role 	
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates group interaction Encourages individuals & groups Mediates group activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish rules of interaction Contribute ideas Accept, modify and/or build on ideas through consensus Perform chosen roles 	
Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refocuses ideation Facilitates interaction Listens to participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add to plan of action Revise plan of action Use, perform, or do 	
Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiates project evaluation Diagnoses student progress Plans future application of learning acquired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate group progress Evaluate their individual contributions Determine future application of learning acquired 	

as scholars. We will organize our description around the five citizenship processes of the Democratic Classroom Interaction Model.

A Supportive School

The Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence opened in 2002 in Waterloo, Iowa. Firmly supported by research on best practices, this public school provides a continuous year calendar, mandatory student/staff school uniforms, early start time, and family choice regarding gender-specific or coed classrooms. The school serves a diverse population consisting of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian students. Approximately eighty-five percent of the 400 students (pre-K-5) qualify for free and reduced lunch. In addition, the school qualifies for an ESL teacher and has Title I Reading School status. The school's approach to community building is also consistent with the Democratic Classroom Interaction Model.

It is the belief of the Cunningham teachers that interactions with the families of the children are the foundation of classroom community building. Families are celebrated as the children's first teachers. The school implements a number of

strategies, including initial teacher contacts through positive phone calls and home/off-site visits; an open house at the beginning of the year; whole family involvement opportunities such as a movie night or game night; a Muffins with Mom and Doughnuts with Dad program; a good character breakfast; and a carnival at the end of school year.

We describe below how two teachers implemented the Democratic Classroom Interaction Model in their second grade classrooms. While the model is built upon a sequential ordering of the five Citizenship Processes, the reader will discover that these elements are flexible and organic in nature. Skillful teachers can move seamlessly from one Citizenship Process to another as the need arises. In this light, instruction takes precedent over the model. The model then provides a lens through which teachers and interested others can analyze and articulate how the dynamics of democratic citizenship can be activated in the elementary classroom.

An Ecology Unit

The overall purpose of this second grade unit of study was for

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Please join us in Houston this November for the 88th NCSS Annual Conference, the nation's premier social studies professional development event.



Howard Zinn—professor emeritus at Boston University, is a historian, playwright, and social activist. The author of numerous books, he has received the Lannan Foundation Literary Award for Nonfiction, and the Eugene V. Debs Award for his writing and political activism. In 2003 he was awarded the Prix des Amis du Monde Diplomatique. He is most known for his groundbreaking book *A People's History of the United States*.

Howard Zinn's work has recently been honored by a former student who generously funded the Zinn Education Project (www.zinnedproject.org) to promote the use of *A People's History of the United States* in middle and high school classrooms.

William Bennett—is an influential and respected voice on cultural, political, and education issues. He is former Secretary of Education and former “drug czar.” He is currently the Washington Fellow of the Claremont Institute and a CNN contributor. He is also the chairman of Americans for Victory over Terrorism, a project dedicated to sustaining and strengthening public opinion as the war on terrorism moves forward, and hosts a nationally broadcast radio show. Dr. Bennett has recently completed a two-volume history of the United States entitled, “America: The Last Best Hope,” Volumes 1 & 2 both New York Times best-sellers. Sponsored by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Kenneth P. Cohen—ExxonMobil Vice President-Public Affairs. Energy Development for the 21st Century

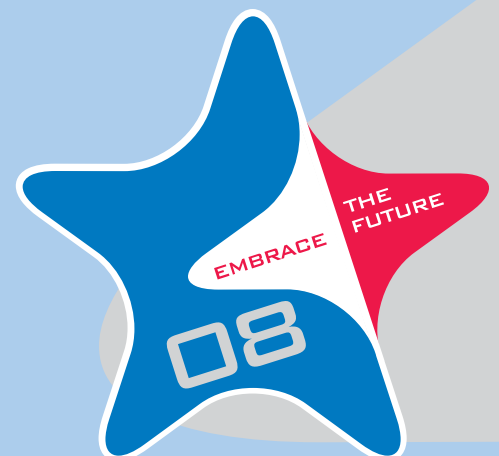
Firoozeh Dumas—author of *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and Laughing without an Accent*

Caiphas Nziramasanga—Professor of Social Studies Education and Director of the Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Zimbabwe. He will deliver the Jan. L. Tucker Memorial Lecture.

Matt Williams—Senior Program Officer in the Office of President and CEO at KnowledgeWorks Foundation and board member of Partnership for 21st Century Skills

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the students to understand that people influence the quality of life of those around them and to recognize that the activities of humans affect plants and animals in many ways. Specific unit objectives are for students to

- Identify words and construct meaning from text, illustrations, graphics, and charts.
- Name the tools that scientists use when conducting a soil experiment.
- Know some of Earth’s natural resources, including land, air, and water.
- Know that selected resources used by people for water, food, and shelter are limited and necessary for their survival.
- Know ways that human activity affects the environment.

Through this unit, students applied new vocabulary and knowledge they gained from interactive lessons and experiments. As a team, teachers and students shared the responsibility for discovering what effect human actions can have on our physical environment. The teachers utilized the Democratic Classroom Interaction Model to help achieve unit objectives and to empower students with a sense of ownership of unit materials.

Communication

Teachers established students’ background knowledge about ecology by introducing a K-W-L Chart. They solicited information from students as the K-column (knowledge) was completed. For example, students demonstrated prior knowledge of recycling and how it is used in their home or community. Students articulated that they recycle pop cans, paper, and plastic. Next, teachers guided students to complete the W-column (want to know). The L- column (what we learned), was completed progressively through discussion and inquiry as the unit progressed.

Participation

This stage involved gathering information based on district-mandated unit vocabulary. Students were first asked to select a unit vocabulary card and draw a corresponding picture representing the word. Pairs of students created a riddle corresponding to the vocabulary words found on their cards. Riddles were then presented to the whole class. For example, a pair of students chose the vocabulary word “natural resource” and stated, “I am useful. I come from nature. If I am used up, I cannot be replaced. What am I?” In the large group setting, children took



turns asking and solving riddles. Following this activity, the riddles with corresponding pictures were displayed on a bulletin board in the hallway for other classes to appreciate.

Interaction

This element provided the opportunity for students and teachers to discuss unit content. For example, the teacher asked the students to brainstorm a list of animals that live in or near trees. Student examples included raccoons, squirrels, owls, and birds. Students then offered comments and wrote journal entries regarding what might happen to the animals if the trees were destroyed or not replanted. One student wrote a journal entry detailing how some animal families might become extinct just as the dinosaurs did. While mediating group discussion and responding to student journal entries, teachers led students to complete the L-column of the chart. This provided an opportunity for students to articulate their growing knowledge of ecology.

Application

This component provided teachers and students an opportunity to discover and extend content knowledge. Teachers first presented a photograph of an earthworm and asked students to identify its physical characteristics. Next, students applied their growing knowledge of earthworms by setting up individual

compost bags where students could make direct observations of how earthworms process compost. The students' plan of action included putting on gloves, placing leaves and worms in compost bags, and observing how the worms changed the compost. Teachers extended the concept by having the classes make one large compost bin with all of their worms in a large plastic tub in order to see composting on a larger scale. Time was allotted for students to write about and discuss how composting is good for the environment.

Reflection

In this phase teachers assessed student progress using traditional as well as activity-based assessments. Specifically, teachers assessed the processes students used in the experiments conducted in class. Teachers observed small group reading sessions and read student journal entries. Some students wrote about recycling milk jugs and pop cans. Others described using less paper on a daily basis in an effort to save trees. Traditional assessment consisted of a district test. Finally, the class applied its knowledge by organizing a school-wide can drive involving both parents and the community.

Conclusion

The Democratic Interaction Model is as applicable to the schools of the 21st century as it was twenty years ago. Specific conclusions fall into five categories.

- **Teacher Leadership:** The model empowers teachers to work with children in large groups, small groups, or as individuals. In this context, teachers are validated in modeling, coaching, and listening to children's ideas. There is mutual exploration and interaction. The teacher leads by providing examples for children to follow, guiding their thinking, and seeking consensus (as contrasted with preconceived responses designed for top down content delivery).
- **Student Empowerment:** The model allows children to take responsibility for their own learning as the teacher leads them to work in large groups, small groups and individually while reporting back to the total group for critique and sharing.
- **Relationship Building:** The model provides a venue for a trusting relationship to develop between teacher and students and between students and their peers. As an atmosphere of respect for multiple perspectives is nurtured, students willingly share knowing their ideas will be valued.
- **Curricular Integration:** The model is applicable to state and local curriculum standards and benchmarks. It also provides opportunities for integration of the social studies, science, mathematics, and literacy curricula. Lessons include concepts of numeracy along with literacy skills such as listening, speaking, writing and reading. The arts

further embellish student inquiry as children use various media to express their ideas.

- **Authentic Assessment:** The model allows for ongoing assessment as an alternative to the dreaded "end of the unit" test. In addition, the model facilitates the blending of instruction with assessment.

In summary, the model provides a structure for classroom interaction that benefits both teachers and learners alike. Children experience successful engagement with learning, while teachers record student growth in knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The disposition of respect for others enhances relationships in and out of the classroom and prepares students to function as contributing members of a community of learners. 🌱

Notes

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